

# YUPPIE CULTURE

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The term 'yuppie' first came to prominence during last year's US presidential campaign. At the time it seemed, from this side of the Atlantic, a mere sociological category, a particular demographic group • young urban (or upwardly mobile) professionals. They were said to be important because observers wondered which way they would go. Well, now we know - they went for Reagan (only the blacks and Jews didn't). Indeed, they are the face - but not the heart and soul - of Reagan's America.

Curiously enough it is hard to find people who think of themselves as yuppies. Yuppies are always *other* people. The label is a construction, produced somewhere between journalism and psephology. Yet yuppiedom is there, a potent image, a potent visible lifestyle that is widely taken to characterise US society today.

Yuppie culture is what life looks like in the big US city centres - in gentrified older quarters, in warehouses turned into markets (a la Covent Garden, Britain's most yuppie invention), in restaurants, clubs and shops. Only black culture - hip-hop, ghetto blasters, street rapping, the larger part of cinema audiences - is as visibly present, and in glaring contrast to yuppie culture's affluent materialism.

The fact that yuppiedom is taken as characterising this America is itself significant. It implies that what is now typical for Americans is the experience of affluence, upward mobility, and the freedom of lifestyle. Given the implacability with which Reaganomics returns millions to poverty, blocks off job opportunities, undermines trade unionism, it is quite appalling to see the media falling over themselves in attempts to



capture, define and analyse yuppiedom as *the* sign of the times.

The yuppie image also corners the market on notions of youth subcultures. Hip-hop does get reported still, but otherwise shops, movies, TV programmes, magazines, anything clearly offering itself as youth-oriented suggest that young people are yuppies. Objectively, this obviously isn't so - Reaganomics is no respecter of youth. But it may work subjectively - if the only image of how to be that you can see around you is yuppiedom, then you may find it difficult to develop more edgy, uppity, rebellious styles.

Politically, yuppies are said to be conservative in economics and liberal on 'issues': they support Reagan's policies on cutting taxes, government spending and economic controls, but do not support his conservative rhetoric on personal standards and behaviour. That is why yuppies are the face but not the heart of Reagan's America. They are what you see, or what the media make you think you see, but they do not respond to the emotional appeals of Reagan. However shallow and

empty his version of them, Reagan does appeal to feelings of pride in one's country, rugged individualism, traditional family-based morality. And yuppies don't go for this. Yuppies are almost by definition unmarried and intent on staying that way, or at least being childless. They generally support the pro-choice lobby on abortion, are not homophobic, don't mind about drugs and favour most kinds of consensual sexual freedom.

This liberalism is not surprising when one considers two of the sources of the yuppie lifestyle - hippies and gay men. From the hippies, yuppies derive their openness to drug experience, their fondness for old fashioned clothes, and, especially, their style in food, a mix of southeast Asian, vegetarian, macro-biotic and 'traditional American' cuisines. Yuppie culture gets its stylishness from the traditional urban culture of gay men: it is from areas of retailing developed by gay men • clothes, hairdressing, interior decoration, flowers - that yuppies buy much of their style. Yuppie styles in dress and body language express a playful

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attitude towards sex roles clearly drawn in part from gay culture, while their rejection of family, procreative sexuality is both gay and hippy. There is something of feminism in this too, but I emphasise the gay and hippy traditions because of the hedonism, the commitment to pleasure, so central to both.

Pleasure for hippy and gay culture was an almost visionary concept. Hippies saw in drugs, flowers, rock music and flowing clothes a freedom from the restricted, cramped, driven quality of straight life. Giving a different inflection to the word 'straight', gays too saw in sexuality, disco, cross-dressing and camp a liberation from the straight jacket of rigid gender roles and family functions. (Some of this visionary quality may look naive now - AIDS has been particularly challenging to the celebration of sexuality in both traditions.) Yet for all that there was a vision of something better, an idea of pleasure as a means of release from the shackles of capitalism and patriarchy, from the way we live now.

There is nothing of this in what remains of the hippie and gay traditions in yuppiedom. It is a hedonism, but not a visionary or transcendent one. Yuppie culture is in this sense 'post-modern' - form without feeling, culture without commitment, manners without meaning. Yuppiedom raids the past for styles that are then cut adrift from the culture and history that gave rise to them, drained of their rich sediment of meaning and association, robbed above all of the subversive edge that sought change and transformation.

Yuppie culture knows about 'the modern'. It understands, for instance, the argument that bourgeois culture is not natural but a construction of the rich - but it doesn't care. Indeed, when asked what they want, yuppies reply 'money'. Asked what they want to be, they say 'rich'. Not for them the intoxications of power, the rewards of interesting work, the joys of dropping out. They don't even seem that fixated on the pleasures that money can bring. It's the stuff itself they want. Theirs is a soul-less hedonism, a materialism that is not only not dialectical, but not sensuous or sensual either.

It's not surprising then that yuppies are untroubled by questions of who gets money and who doesn't, whether some having money doesn't imply many not having it. Their commitment to money certainly supports Reagan's policies, as

their votes showed. Yet their relentless hedonism may yet prove a problem to Reagan. Not being the heart of Reaganism, yuppies are not over-impressed by demands that some of their earnings should go to support adventurism in Central America. Lacking Reagan's idealism, (however phoney we may judge it), lacking too any sense of the connectedness of a pleasurable lifestyle and the economic organisation of society, they are also disinclined to get too worked up about communism. What's it to them if some peasants want to have - or even have forced upon them - a commie government? They've got their clubs and salads and jogging suits. Not only does their complete lack of any ideals, left or right, make them an enemy of all kinds of government spending, but even more they would not fancy a war which might involve their being drafted.

Yuppies are the palpable atmosphere

of 80s conservatism. Day to day it's nice to have all this excellent food, pleasing to see these fun clothes. It's a relief too to feel that these young, successful people, people who will have a lot of power in the future, are not going to support a massive turning back of the clock on civil liberties, are not going to want the US to go blundering into Central America and who knows where else. But, in the end, it is a lifestyle that feels arid, joyless, boring, one posited on indifference to others. Yuppies don't just not care that others are poor; they also don't know that their comfortable lifestyle depends on others being poor. The USA has always been rather effective at keeping that idea at bay - that is why socialist traditions have found it so hard to make headway there. If yuppies may put some sort of block on the wilder reaches of Reaganism, they are also proof against other visions.